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EXPRESSING GRATITUDE FOR INTERNATIONAL
ASSISTANCE AFTER HURRICANE KATRINA DISASTER

HON. TOM LANTOS

OF CALIFORNIA

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Thursday, September 8, 2005

Mr. Speaker, I yield myself such time as I may consume.

Mr. Speaker, I rise in strong support of this legislation, and I urge all of my colleagues to do so.

The United States is the largest provider of humanitarian assistance in this world. Whether in the aftermath of Hurricane Mitch or the devastation of the Asian tsunami, the United States and our military have been in the front lines of responding to the needs of starving and destitute victims of nature's fury. It is only fitting, therefore, Mr. Speaker, that when we face devastation from a deadly hurricane that overwhelmed our own disaster plans, countries around the globe should respond to our own needs with offers of assistance.

Let me join my colleagues on the other side of the aisle in expressing our gratitude for these offers.

I am not, however, satisfied with the reception of these offers by some branches of our own government. I want to commend Secretary Rice and the Department of State for making significant and successful efforts to catalog these offers from abroad, but we learned from press reports that the Federal Emergency Management Agency was unable to process them and to determine what would be of

assistance and what would not. Let me give my colleagues an example.

The Swedish Government has offered water purification equipment. No item is more desperately needed in Louisiana than water purification equipment. They have also offered a cellular phone network which could have done much to ease the communications challenges on the gulf coast. As of yesterday, these offered items remain in Sweden.

It took a week for our government to accept the offer of four Canadian rescue vessels.

A German communications company was willing to provide an integrated satellite and cellular phone system that could handle 5,000 calls at once. The company waited for days for any response.

This area is just one more example of the failures of executive agencies tasked with disaster relief in responding to this, the greatest natural disaster ever to confront our Nation.

It is simply shameful that FEMA did not realize the scope of this disaster and failed to trigger its most significant response until the end of the day when the levees broke in New Orleans. It is simply shameful that there was not a way for FEMA to accept offers of assistance from our own military as

well as citizen States across the Nation. It is simply shameful that the poor and the sick and the elderly were left without supplies and protection from the marauding gangs that seeped in and around New Orleans.

I am sure that there is plenty of blame to go around in unraveling the bureaucratic bungling that contributed to this unacceptable response, but one thing, Mr. Speaker, is clear: FEMA's leadership failed, and I call on its director to resign today.

Let us find a better way to accept offers of assistance from our friends abroad, from our fellow citizens, and from our own military.

In order to address all these shortcomings, I strongly urge the appointment of a truly independent bipartisan commission made up of public figures of distinction and integrity and experts on disaster relief to investigate the failures that have cost the lives of so many. An investigation launched by the administration or dominated by one party will never be able to get to the bottom of what went wrong. We cannot afford such a flawed investigation. We need to get this right.

Mr. Speaker, I urge all of my colleagues to support this resolution.